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The most dangerous game

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Abstract
Sandwiched between the post-medium condition, and the potential erasure of all traditional media coming from the digital horizon, Michaël Borremans delivers highly constructed paintings and films that negotiate temporal disjunctions and intermedial relations together with an expanded form of exhibition. This article sets out to unpick some of the underlying mechanisms at play beneath the surface of his work, and to uncover some of the reasons why it might be deemed to be relevant; a question the artist himself appears to be at pains to answer.

> My art work deals with the spectator.
>
> (Borremans 2010)

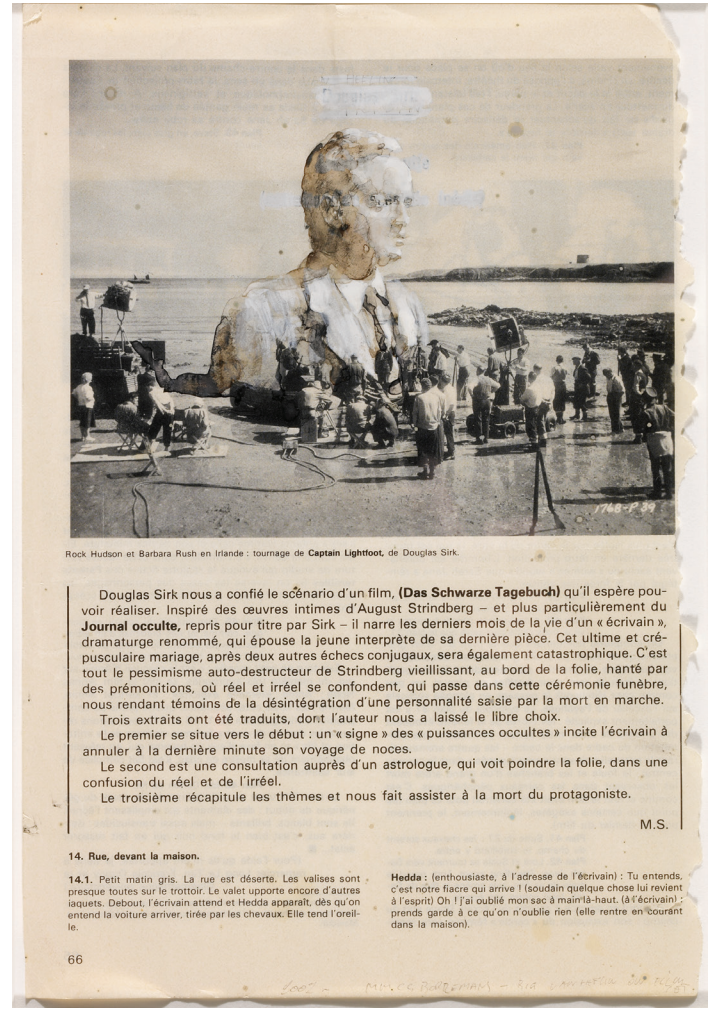
It is reassuring when a painter declares an interest in his audience, as it suggests a mode of attention directed beyond the canvas towards the encounter. Within our contemporary frictionless digital mediascape, this posture cannot but suggest a spectator engaging with painting as a discreet mode of production that is recognizable *as* art, its form preceding its message. Given Michaël Borremans'

insistence on the enduring significance of painting, and his inclination towards putting the body under various regimes of observation and physical duress, we might also ask the question in relation to both subject and encounter; to what ends?

Michaël Borremans' practice proposes an agency for painting that operates 'out of its time', and negotiates the 'in-betweenness' of the still and moving image, mobilizing by way of the tableau and *tableau vivant*, a range of traditional media including drawing, painting, film and sculpture. While early works often depict the situated act of observing *Terror Watch* (2002), *Milk* (2003), *The (Courmajeur) Conducinator* (2002), his recent exhibitions increasingly take place, or are staged within reconfigured or modified spaces that suggest modes of spectatorship, and that stage-manage observation itself. These actual meticulously planned spectacles in turn echo imagined scenarios from his earlier drawings. The encounter and the *dispositif* of the gallery emerge as key components, and are embedded in his conceptual approach to the presentation of his paintings as 'discreet bodies of work'. This expanded form of exhibition can be taken as another medium that foregrounds stagecraft within an ever-expanding repertoire of references and devices, which multiply and subtend the painted work itself. Within Borremans' intermedial approach to image production, while some media slip into other media as forms, the real surface medium persists intact, along with its frames of reference. As such, media might be considered here as unproblematic – in the sense that they transmit readymade pictorial forms – albeit subject to remediation. While recurring conventions operate at the centre of Borremans' practice, there is an interplay between his drawing, painting and film works, where images migrate across surfaces often producing paradoxical effects; images that continually flip between the real and the virtual, the immediate and the mediated, which in turn open the work up to the effects of reality bleed for the viewer.

Surface

Almost without exception Borremans is presented primarily as a painter who claims a continuity with the past, by flaunting the qualities of a particular form of *alla prima* brushwork; based on craft, the skilful handling of paint and primarily through a hand-touch sensibility. While this familiar trope of the artist as alchemist might be viewed as an overdetermined approach, it also persists to carry with it the experience of human presence, both un-represented and un-actualized, that perhaps in our present moment we should not be too quick to overlook. The attendant effect both consciously and unconsciously on the spectator, connect to certain mythic signals about presence versus absence, revealing versus concealing, clarity versus mystery (Gidal 1972: 12). While focusing our attention on painting as *facture* risks creating a blind spot in relation to the work's agency, deflecting us towards the surface characteristics that lure us into the work and arrest the gaze; the visual frequency of the surface also serves to ignite relations between the somatic and semiotic. Additionally, for the viewer



Rock Hudson et Barbara Rush en Irlande : tournage de **Captain Lightfoot**, de Douglas Sirk.

Douglas Sirk nous a confié le scénario d'un film, **(Das Schwarze Tagebuch)** qu'il espère pouvoir réaliser. Inspiré des œuvres intimes d'August Strindberg – et plus particulièrement du **Journal occulte,** repris pour titre par Sirk – il narre les derniers mois de la vie d'un « écrivain », dramaturge renommé, qui épouse la jeune interprète de sa dernière pièce. Cet ultime et crépusculaire mariage, après deux autres échecs conjugaux, sera également catastrophique. C'est tout le pessimisme auto-destructeur de Strindberg vieillissant, au bord de la folie, hanté par des prémonitions, où réel et irréel se confondent, qui passe dans cette cérémonie funèbre, nous rendant témoins de la désintégration d'une personnalité saisie par la mort en marche.

Trois extraits ont été traduits, dont l'auteur nous a laissé le libre choix.

Le premier se situe vers le début : un « signe » des « puissances occultes » incite l'écrivain à annuler à la dernière minute son voyage de noces.

Le second est une consultation auprès d'un astrologue, qui voit poindre la folie, dans une confusion du réel et de l'irréel.

Le troisième récapitule les thèmes et nous fait assister à la mort du protagoniste.

M.S.

14. Rue, devant la maison.

14.1. Petit matin gris. La rue est déserte. Les valises sont presque toutes sur le trottoir. Le valet apporte encore d'autres iaquets. Debout, l'écrivain attend et Hedda apparaît, dès qu'on entend la voiture arriver, tirée par les chevaux. Elle tend l'oreille.

Hedda : (enthousiaste, à l'adresse de l'écrivain) : Tu entends, c'est notre fiacre qui arrive ! (soudain quelque chose lui revient à l'esprit) Oh ! j'ai oublié mon sac à main là-haut. (à l'écrivain) : prends garde à ce qu'on n'oublie rien (elle rentre en courant dans la maison).

66

Figure 1: Michaël Borremans, Big van Heflin on film set, 2002. Pencil and watercolour on paper. 27.0 × 18.4cm. Photographer Miguel Fonseca da Costa. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

of painting, engaging the haptic aspects of visually scanning a marked surface can often produce synaesthetic moments in which the encounter exceeds the image and carries the illusion of other sensations. A characteristic of painting premised on the work's *facture*, is that it channels a sense of proximity and intimacy between painter, subject and beholder. The articulation of brush mark on the surface being perceived as a way of making manifest the emotions and thoughts of the artist. 'Intimate' in the sense that it acknowledges and reveals experience, familiarity or understanding of the other.

The philosopher Richard Wollheim has a lot to say about the inter-subjective complexities involved in looking at painting. In 'What the spectator sees', he re-thinks the encounter and the contradictions inherent in the reciprocity between image and depiction, and how the viewer is pre-figured in the conceptualization of the work. Observing that the artist does not only paint *with* the eyes but also *for* the eyes, Wollheim hones in on questions of mark and surface, leading to his interpretation of the experience of looking at a painting from 'seeing-as', to 'seeing-in'. The inscribed surface of the tableau being understood as juxtaposed to *it*, and is described as:

> […] a distinct kind of perception, triggered off by the presence within the field of vision of a differentiated surface […] The distinctive phenomenological feature I call 'twofoldness', because, when 'seeing-in' occurs, two things happen: I am visually aware of the surface I look at, and I discern something standing out in front of, or receding behind, something else.
>
> (Wollheim 1991: 105)

A variety of 'configurational aspects' relating to the image and its material surface mediated by the picture plane are presented in his essay that include amongst others; clouds, stains, anamorphosis and doppelgangers. 'Seeing-in' is identified as a natural capacity, and thought to precede representation in so far as the viewer can identify or hallucinate something which may or may not be there, as in his given example of the Roscharch blot. 'Twofoldness' being a synthesis of two aspects of a single experience, rather than two separate elements of a picture oscillating from one to the other, as per Gestalt figure-ground relations.

Engaging with a painting requires from the viewer the possibility for presenting what they see to themselves, in which they question what they are seeing the work '*as*'. In doing so, oppositions inevitably emerge relating to: surface versus depth; the real versus the copy; the senses versus language. All of which are found to be predicated on cultural, or biological formations. In relation to signification and how paintings relate to and release information, a distinction is made between 'pictures of particular things and pictures of things merely of a particular kind…'. Wollheim raises the example of the genre paintings of Manet, adding,

What can be represented is just what can be seen in a marked surface rather than what can be seen face-to-face […] For what I see in a surface is subject to precisely the same cross-classification as what a painting represents (1991: 129).

To complicate matters further, these are not seen as being mutually exclusive categories. In so far as the only way to embody thought in painting occurs at the surface level in the painting's *facture*, Wollheim contends that anything the painting can say must be realized at this level otherwise it is inconsequential. The parallax between seeing the image through its material surface and reading the work in relation to what it represents, inevitably feeds back into the intentionality of the artist; because it is precisely these mechanisms that bring weight to bear on how the painting relates to the world at large. Borremans takes up the address of 'paintings of a particular kind', reinforcing the essentiality of the medium, while resorting to archetype, pictorial tropes and the generic form as a kind of loaded gun. The distribution of surface information is calculated and circulated in relation to his expectations of the viewer, and transferred or withheld according to the desired register of affect ('Fire from the Sun', Zwirner, Hong Kong, 2018).

Borremans has a great deal invested in the visual rhetoric and effects of painting, together with the phenomenology and mechanics of seeing. However, rather than disrupting or employing familiar strategies that isolate or extrapolate around a singular contrasting aspect, he holds them collectively 'switched on' but in abeyance within the tableau form, often extending them across a variety of material supports, in which the indexical links multiply. The viewer's attention being kept locked firmly onto the work's exegesis. These reciprocal aspects of the encounter underpin the work, and persist as it expands from tableau and *tableau vivant*, to immersive exhibition. In addition to the tripartite dynamics of posture, production and reception, Wollheim adds the term 'feedback', and expands the 'psychological account' of the way painting conveys meaning, in relation to giving and withholding pleasure. In Borremans' work, although pleasure and pain are part of the mix, we should not overlook the effect of withholding signification itself. This is where the painted surface as a lure becomes mutable and the anticipated promise of intimacy begins to ring hollow.

Reinforcing the 'enshrined' historical 'posture' of the painter Wollheim adds, 'There is I believe, no source of information that has for the artist the same weight, the same authority, the same immediacy, as the posture that history requires of him. The posture draws the knowledge out of him' (Wollheim 1991: 144). While Borremans presents himself as a compliant medium, we should not forget that he chooses his type of brushwork in the same vein as he chooses hairstyles for the sitters in his portraits, not out of necessity, but as an option amongst a catalogue of possibilities, as a way of locating time, and as a means to a non-specific end. Echoing Wollheim, he also demonstrates that the history of figurative painting can be read in relation to brushwork. More pointedly for the initiated viewer, behind Booremans' choice of painting style lies the evocation of the 'gifted' painter itself. These are associations Borremans encourages the viewer to make. However aggrandizing this

Figure 2: Michaël Borremans, Fire From the Sun, *2017. Oil on canvas. 205.0 × 280.0cm. Photographer Peter Cox. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.*

attachment to tradition might initially be perceived to be, it should not be regarded solely as a means of validation. References to art history are intended to connect to an imagined constituency for the reception of the work. While, on the one hand painting provides guiding principles around reciprocity and is the primary element in the work's reception, there are other invisible devices that suggest operations of relationality and intermediality. As it has developed, the emphasis in Borremans' practice increasingly shifts from production to reception, from the medium bearing or being the message, to the potential of the viewer becoming the medium. To focus on the surface medium itself, and even though the convergent *dispositifs* of painting and film drive the logic of production, might be to overlook a significant aspect *apropos* the works agency.

The still image and the mobile audience

> if an artist wanted to engage directly with the contemporary as a subject, it might be necessary to resort to digital platforms. Whereas painting, on the other hand, has the big advantage of producing resistant images that don't easily disappear in today's iconoclastic spate.
>
> (Borremans 2010)

At the risk of over simplifying the many kinks in the Belgian line, identifying the connection – which Borremans himself makes to Magritte via Marcel Broodthaers – has the virtues of indicating: a critical interest in pictorial logic; hegemonic structures of display; ordinariness; and strategies of attraction and resistance towards the act of spectatorship. Situated within this lineage, Borremans' practice begins to come into focus as a strategically planned project, in which he tests the reception of the work and the viewer's expectations of what a painting can deliver today. Any competitive edge or purchase painting might possess being predicated on its relation to other media. The agency of the post-medium artwork, as we know, lies in being judged according to how it might engage with external systems beyond its material logic, including that of, but not exclusively, art. Likewise, in order for art to be recognized as such when subsumed into the immediacy of the digital mediascape, will also require of it to be seen as a medium distinct from the medium through which it is experienced. The ability to apprehend the image as painting would similarly require the recognition of the medium as a back link or citation.

Perhaps the first thing which strikes the viewer when confronting Borremans' work, beyond the pull of history, is the difficulty in connecting it with its contemporary moment. No condition or symptom is immediately recognizable or being directly represented. It has been noted that his figure paintings and films appear somewhat remote, hollow and detached. When interviewed, the artist offers no resistance to being associated with a romantic form of art practice. The exigent questions around painting are seemingly set aside. Instead, the work is taken as having a life based on

its ability to generate curiosity and to simultaneously conform to, and confront expectations. While Borremans' work might reflect the disjunctions and contradictions of the moment, he enlists painting from a position that takes the internal dialogue and its episodic trajectory; the hauntology of which is well documented throughout the twentieth century, as complete. Preferring instead to allow it fully formed, with all its attendant, cultural, historical and psychological associations, to play out as one component within a non-hierarchical matrix. In short, to be itself. The significance of this parataxis is that Borremans does not isolate painting. By demonstrating that media do not exist in isolation; through remediation, he asks the question: what keeps this desire to look at still images, or even paintings, in place? The foregrounding of the tableau form is just another device in this hyper-mediated approach, which he declares as being 'truly contemporary'.

While the affordances of digital technology on the painted image are seemingly far reaching, the relationship between the still image and the mobile audience has resulted in a paradigm shift in the temporal economy of the image and the degree of attention afforded it. In addition to our private screens, witness the ubiquity of the digital wall, and the cinematic-situated space, wherein distinctive 'media forms' seamlessly collide. Within this undifferentiating digital stream, the question for painting and film is whether the constitutive features of each medium are being eroded or whether they become more recognizably distinct. For Borremans we might presume it is the latter. In contrast, the media theorist Friedrich Kitler seems less optimistic, suggesting that we are heading towards 'a total media link on a digital base (that) will erase the very concept of medium. Instead of wiring people and technologies, absolute knowledge will run as an endless loop.[…] But there still are media; there still is entertainment' (1999: 2). Literary theorist Bernard Siegert, commenting on the link between data and art, levels an even greater challenge, identifying real-time networking as short circuiting any opportunity for response or reflection and by extension any need for art at all:

> The impossibility of technologically processing data in real time is the possibility of art. As long as processing in real time was not available, data always had to be stored intermediately somewhere – on skin, wax, clay, stone, papyrus, linen, paper, wood, or on the cerebral cortex- in order to be transmitted or otherwise processed. It was precisely in this way that data became something palpable for human beings, that it opened up the field of art. Conversely it is nonsensical to speak of the availability of real-time processing, insofar as the concept of availability implies the human being as subject. After all, real-time processing is the exact opposite of being available. It is not available to the feedback loops of the human senses, but instead to the standards of signal processors, since real-time processing is defined precisely as the evasion of the senses.
>
> (Siegert 1999: 12)

Within the realignment of data and 'real time' technology, the implications and challenges remain uncertain not only for painting but for the institutions that display it (Gere 2012: 2). For the moment at least we mostly encounter art in spaces that lend themselves to the display of objects, designed to create a degree of intimacy between the viewer and the artwork. However, it is not enough to state that painting, along with other material forms – through their physical presentation within the gallery, or the museum – offer some resistance, or even the opportunity for contemplation within our accelerated culture. Rather than being resistant to these culturally transformative effects, Borremans offers a pictorial commentary in which we might detect the consequences of increased leisure time, instances of behavioural control and oppressive social conditions. These paintings remind us, and perhaps alert us, to be wary of utopian systems that promise a better future, *The Swimming Pool* (2001), *The German* (2003), *The Greatness of Our Loss* (2006). Whether these represent our past, our present or a retro-fitted future is difficult to determine.

Aesthesis

'I create a sort of utopia inside an atopia. My drawings and paintings are thought models inside which certain rules and laws apply that are not necessarily valid in the reality we are familiar with' (Borremans 2010).

Collectively referred to by the artist as 'official monuments, projections, and installations', these small figure compositions are structured in such a way as to suggest a staging for instructional purposes, often including representations of gatherings or the witnessing of some spectacle, ritual or civic activity. Their contexts are varied and include public swimming baths, the museum, the cinema, the archive and the committee room. Collectively, they might suggest a demographic census, however a closer look at the more ambiguous activities within singular works appear like decontextualized stills from Stanley Milgram's infamous 'Obedience to Authority Study' 1961. Those that indicate public spaces axiomatically imply that there is no 'public space', often incorporating the image of monumental projections frequently described as Kafka-esque and isolating. The focus of attention here is on the viewer, pointing to the dangers of a passive, uncritical and spectatorial mode of consumption, in which we concede to ideologies that render us as passive subjects. In *The Swimming Pool* (2001), Borremans further emphasizes our complicity in these effects, by way of public and painful retribution.

The artist recently declared the production of these mixed media works discontinued, due to the strain on his eyesight, affecting his ability to work on such a small scale. If we take this at face value, then these works might be seen to constitute a period of planning which is now complete. Collectively, these can be viewed in retrospect as early career blue prints, or in relation to their scribbled marginalia, as a game-plan for future exhibitions: visualizations for architectural buildings, film

Figure 3: Michaël Borremans, The Slide, *2004. Oil on canvas. 60.0 × 80.0cm. Photographer Peter Cox. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp. Michaël Borremans*, The German, *2004–2007. 21,2 (h) × 33.0 × 13.7cm scale model: mixed media dvd: transferred 35mm film (4:3) – 39′ 59″ (continuous loop) - colour: VGA. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.*

works and sketches for sculptures; many of which have subsequently been realized. These eidetic works are self-evidently double agents, each one suggesting a fold between the image and the support's previous life. Along with the artist's use of taxidermy, death masks and *tableau vivant*, they act as the equivalent to a photograph's indexicality. Elements that reflect Borremans' fascination with display and pre-cinematic forms which both arrest time and contain a suggestion of movement, shifting between the real and representation.

Cinema carries with it its own form of hypnosis and appears in Borremans work; not merely as spectacle, but as an example of another normalizing social apparatus. Yet, Borremans is careful to depict the viewer's engagement with the spectacle as variously absorbed *Milk* (2003) or indifferent *The Swimming Pool* (2001). Following Roland Barthes observations, these tableau shift our attention away from the screen, identifying the situated spectacle that focuses not just on the event, but also with what surrounds it. Barthes famously described the cinematic viewer as simultaneously occupying two bodies; the narcissistic and the perverse. The perverse being the only possible corrective to the hypnotic effect of cinema.

> […] not the image (on screen) but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theatre, leaving the hall: in short in order to distance, in order to 'take off', I complicate a 'relation' by a 'situation'. What I use to distance myself from the image, – that, ultimately, is what fascinates me: I am hypnotized by a distance, and this distance is not critical (intellectual); it is one might say an amorous distance: would there be, in the cinema itself (and taking the word at it's etymological suggestion) a possible bliss of *discretion?*
>
> (Barthes 1989: 349, original emphasis)

While cultivating this distancing effect, Barthes rather than denouncing the soporific aspect of the cinematic in favour of the prevailing discourse around 'apparatus theory', emphasizes its sensual qualities. Philip Watts sees this as Barthes' '[…] attempt to break the strictures of formalism by turning to epicureanism' (Watts 2016: 70). Likewise, Borremans' paintings return his viewer via the haptic marked surface, and the medial registers of tactility layered within his works to the spectatorial body, in which synaesthetic effects exceed the apparatus from which it is produced, his oil paintings often displaying effects incommensurate to their task. It is this inclination towards 'painting for the eyes' and injecting visual pleasure into the encounter itself that Borremans identifies with, and retrospectively takes up the address and style of painting used by Manet. In contrast to more modern-centric perspectives, Borremans locates Manet at the end of classicism. This orientation effectively maintains an unbroken link to the tradition of humanist painting while providing a critical distance from his contemporary subject, which is addressed as anything but human. This is a similar challenge to that raised by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben who asks from his students the 'capacity to measure up to the exigency of texts that are centuries removed' (Agamben 2009: 39). Borremans, by adopting this look of the past, asks his audience to engage not only with a disjunctive present, but also to re-connect to some of the attendant aesthetic principles that such an art form carries in its wake.

> I do not paint portraits.
>
> (Borremans 2010)

The painting *Portrait* (2005) represents as far as can be gathered, an anonymous character who appears to suffer from the astigmatism Amblyopia, commonly referred to as 'lazy eye'; a disorder of the visual system that is characterized by indistinct vision. While a drooping eyelid is the visible symptom, one possible medical explanation is that the brain favours one eye over the other. Whether a visual metaphor, a provocation to the viewer to be more vigilant or the detection of a prevalent malaise within society at large remains unclear. However, there are many other works that suggest ways in which vision might be interfered with throughout the artist's practice, to the

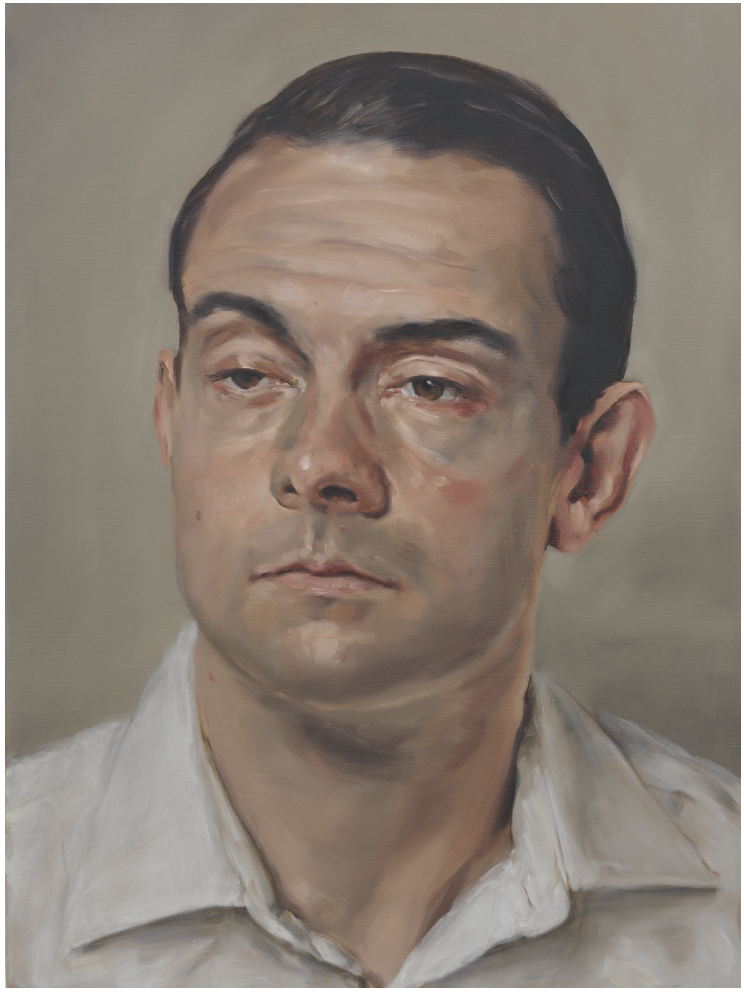


Figure 4: Michaël Borremans, Portrait*, 2005. Oil on canvas. 80 × 60cm, Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.*

extent that the act of seeing might be taken as a leitmotif. Some representations are physiological, others involve the use of tape, blindfolds and applications to the eyes of varying liquid viscosity. Collectively, they suggest a corrective purpose, pointing towards our inability or willingness to see things as they are. *Portrait* was the first of fourteen paintings the audience encountered in the exhibition 'Horse Hunting' (2006, Zwirner, NewYork). The body of work exhibited declared a more resolute engagement with the 'posture' of the portrait painter, together with a strategic use of scale, shifting the focus of the work further towards a particular conceptualization of exhibition as *mise en scène*. Downcast viewing of earlier work is replaced with the face to face encounter with the aristocratic gaze of portraits in three quarter view. The pre-production of each painting, including the selection of clothes, studio lighting, props and prosthetics, is calculated to create an anachronistic effect. The constructed images are all produced in shallow space, with a similar muted palette, and a shared sense of theatricality. Yet collectively they appear discontinuous and isolated from one another. This spatialized arrangement of paintings according to scale, has the effect of co-opting the viewer into the *milieu* of the show; one in which the spectator becomes implicated in the narrative that the exhibition's title proposes. The staging, both 'in' the paintings and 'of' the paintings, marks a shift; effectively realizing the potential for the encounter suggested in the artist's earlier drawings *Museum for Brave Art* (2000), *In the Louvre – The House of Opportunity* (2003). Here, the convergence of oil painting referenced in relation to a specific artistic trope, and posited as an enduring vital language begins to come into focus. The exhibition essentially presents painting as a foil where the viewer is trapped, seesawing between stylized representation and hypermediacy, with an arrangement of fragments that collectively do not add up.

Borremans consistently plays down the possible signification in his work by referring to his paintings as merely paint. While perhaps aspiring to the immanent condition of abstract painting, the address of this serial arrangement sets the viewer on a forensic trail in which the principle viewing method becomes one of 'hunting down', the invitation being, to move from painting to painting. Manet's *Maximilian*, is evidently referenced in the painting *The Bodies* (2005), but behind this initial connection lies the 'posture' depicted in Velazquez's *Las Meninas*.

> [One] cannot look for long at Las Meninas without wanting to find out how it is done. I remember that when it hung in Geneva in 1939, I used to go very early in the morning, before the gallery was open, and try to stalk it, as if it really were alive […] I would start from as far away as I could, when the illusion was complete, and come gradually nearer, until suddenly what had been a hand, and a ribbon, and a piece of velvet, dissolved into a salad of beautiful brush strokes.
>
> (*Civilisation* 1969)

Kenneth Clark chose his words well. This is perhaps the most stalked painting in art history. By drawing attention to the play between the fragment and the whole, proximity and distance, he identifies the reciprocity within the encounter. The word 'salad' in correlation to the brush mark immediately suggests a sense of weightlessness and crisp immediacy, which in turn leads to a synaesthetic moment. The description deftly captures the manner in which the viewer is brought into a dynamic and somatic encounter with the work, and with this, the embodied gaze. Invoking the literal sensation of taste, while also making the connection between eye and mouth, blurs the boundaries between the viewer's body and the work. Ernst Gombrich identified synaesthesia as striking a balance between aesthetic pleasure and regressive pleasure, locating taste in its material permutation, also suggesting that the origin of aesthetic experience is the body. Pointing to the use of the French word *cuisine* to describe the artist's manipulation of paint, he connects it first to the phrase, 'a feast for the eye', before going on further to equate measured consumption with visual proportion (Peuker 2007: 162). Borremans' manipulation of paint we know is more than enough to satisfy the eye. The seductive quality of the buttery brushwork in part masks or anaesthetizes the content which, as is evident in so much of his work, places the body under duress that borders, and often crosses, into the sadomasochistic.

Intermediality

> You can make a more interesting painting when it is shiny. Reproductions from books have shiny elements – flickering light – this is a painting executed in film – a *diapositive* that vibrates.
>
> (Borremans 2010, emphasis added)

Borremans introduced the cinematic into his practice very early on, well before he began making film versions of his paintings. Having identified material and haptic characteristics common to both paint and celluloid, he subsequently adds an extra layer of intermediality into what is already a rich mix of media relations. The layering of references within his earlier work is replaced with a more formal de-contextualized and reductivist minimalism. Even if the *tableau vivant* films are framed and presented as moving paintings *The Feeding* (2006), their mode of reception is of a different register when they are viewed in conjunction with one another. What these paintings and films share is an attention to the crafted image over narrative; a theatricality and with this, an acute attention to the effects of lighting on the articulation of the form of the object represented. To state that the paintings operate like films and conversely the films operate like paintings in time, is too simplistic an appraisal, which fails to recognize the effects of the peripheral components that make each form distinct. Time if only nominally animated in the filmwork blurs the essential characteristics of each medium. Paradoxically, these moving images draw attention to the very nature of stasis itself.

Figure 5: Michaël Borremans, Weight, *2005. 35 mm film. 9:44 continuous loop, 35.5 × 27.5 × 4.0cm. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.*

Through the elimination of narrative associated with cinema, they recuperate the pictorial form, together with the potential of the pensive moment associated with painting. The filmed *tableau vivant*, which initially seems to go against the material logic of the medium's propensity for motion, confronts the viewer with painting's capacity for absorption.

While the artist has declared a perverse pleasure in making paintings, when there is no need of painting. This perversity is doubled when he projects the language of one redundant medium into the form of another redundant medium. Joachim Paech describes the doubling up of media as a 'constitutive intermediality'; the repetition of one medium as the content of its form within another medium (Paech quoted in Pethő 2011: 39). A more complicated description again formulated by Paech is:

> The only possibility to, as it were, reach the medium behind the form consists in self-observation of the observation and the re-entry of the medium as a form or as a back link, in which mediality as the constitutive difference in the oscillation between medium and form becomes observable as the 'parasitic third,' whose background noise renders the event of the difference, thus, the message, perceptible and comprehensible.
>
> (Paech quoted in Pethő 2011: 39)

This is also described as comparable to the oscillating aspect of the figure-ground relationship that is similarly reliant on the predisposition of the viewer. As recurring motifs shift between drawing, painting and film, Borremans' intention seems not to attempt to mix media or expand the languages of each medium; either by convergence, bricolage or through hybridization. This is a practice defined by the essential boundaries of each language. What we see is closer to an embedding of one mediated form within another, so that a sculptural form realized within a painting might appear in a film *Weight* (2006), or the figure composition from a film can be transposed into a painting *The Storm* (2006). This might also happen in reverse; the provenance of which is often deliberately left undisclosed. Intermediality lends itself well to Borremans' project, being reliant upon the embodied spectator, primarily engaging the senses over the textual. This might also be understood as a further underlining of the ekphrastic impulse in Borremans' practice, as a way to circumvent words, he adopts one visual language to describe the form of another. When seen in exhibitions together, paradoxical contrasts between the autographic mark and the reprographic surface set in play a range of textural effects between the immanent and illusion, in which dynamic medial differences for the viewer produce instances of 'reality bleed'. Agnes Pethő identifies this recuperation of the real as produced not by a synthesis but as a recognizable process of differentiation; again analogous to the dynamics of figure-ground perception.

> Accordingly the tableau (vivant) does not attempt to merge representation with the real and to collapse the distance between signifier and signified, but emerges as a site for cultivating their distance in the opposition of sensual form and abstract meaning, moving image and static painting, live bodies in action and objects contemplated as visual display, framing their intricate plays of 'in-betweenness'.
>
> (Pethő 2014: 53)

In *Weight* (2006) the singular figure of a young girl with a perfectly pleated skirt and braided hair is presented as a geometric form within a *tableau vivant* rotating in slow motion. The pacing of the work, combined with the lack of action, only adds to the sense that it is the viewer that is being tested. The figure is truncated, meticulously staged and lit, and could initially be mistaken for a doll. This *objet de curiosité* contains a trace of commodity surface in the combined effects of studio lighting and slow movement that emphasize the plasticity of the figure. This is the objectified display of the prototype. A similar chremamorphism extends to the figures in Borremans' related films *Automats* (2015) and *Taking Turns* (2015), which take their cultural reference from the wax work and the 'cinema of attractions'. A more recent connection, when considering the figure as a kind of 'show room dummy', produces a synaesthetic moment in which the audio track from Kraftwerk's automaton project 'Trans Europe Express' (1976), leads to Alain Robbe Grillet's film noir of the same name. Set on a train journey from Paris to Antwerp, 'Trans Europe Express' (1967) is a typically structural reflexive film of the period, which places the making of the film within its narrative. Peppered throughout with sadomasochistic episodes, towards the end of the film there appears a burlesque spectacle of a naked girl slowly rotating, kneeling before the gaze of the audience. There is no direct significance in this connection, merely that the film has two endings, a hollowed out book whose pages are moulded to conceal a weapon, and the memorable line delivered by the director himself, that, 'the trouble with real stories is that they're so boring'. The point here is that signification is not the point. Borremans might agree with Robbe-Grillet's assertion that paintings, like novels – though their forms propose narrative – in fact have nothing to tell us. That they should instead offer a metaspace as an alternative to the real world. For Borremans, painting and film operate laterally allowing personal experience to elide with a vertigo of associations ranging from nineteenth century aesthetic theories of 'pure vision' to popular culture.

Stagecraft

> It is interesting to project very different things into a medium, than what the medium can actually bear itself.
>
> (Borremans 2010)

Figure 6: Michaël Borremans, Black Mould *(installation view David Zwirner, London 2015). Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.*

A darker and more atavistic turn surfaced in Borremans' exhibition *Black Mould* (Zwirner, London, 2015). The complex staging between paintings and theatrical setting brought these counterparts into sharp relief, effectively introducing a more expanded form of exhibition into the artist's repertoire. Staged for dramatic effect, the paintings were thematically arranged across the various levels of the gallery, with the motif of the hooded cleric figure repeated throughout the exhibition. Serial viewing was the principle method for engaging the viewer, with each room linked by the developing but disjunctive narrative of the *déjà vu* subject. Between floor levels, the temperature of the action depicted, heightened or descended, depending on the viewer's disposition. Within such a contrived and staged arrangement of pictures the question inevitably arose as to how the viewer was conceptually figured. The paintings showcased Borremans' stock devices, including recognizably stylistic tropes, contrasting use of scale, and references to popular culture. Presented on walls blocked out in a mid-teal colour suggested a museological context, reminiscent of the kind of backdrop used to display seventeenth and eighteenth-century Spanish portraits; a device also used in painting, theatre and cinema, to create figure-ground contrast. On entering the first room, the viewer was confronted by a uniform line of small paintings made on book covers and panels. Each set into a shallow, recessed space in the gallery wall, with stage lights directed onto the floor, flooding rectangles that approximated the proportions of the paintings. These various juxtapositions having seemingly been contrived to create a distancing effect, as the action represented in the space of the paintings could not have been in sharper contrast to their presentation. Here, stage-craft had stepped out of the pictures to take centre stage. In the attempt to heighten the encounter, the fictitious context created a distancing effect from the paintings, while at the same time, the spectator became aware of being complicit and part of the *mise en scène*. By foregrounding the skin layer of the gallery as museum, Borremans reduced painting to a recognizable component, as one element in a *milieu* of mediation in which the encounter itself became the focus. Painting here can again only be understood as a decoy. It is not just the subjects that are hollow, the form itself becomes a proxy. Borremans re-plays the reception of painting as a construction, re-engaging the form – not as authentic, but as an imitation – delivering it within the double frame of the exhibition, as *mis-en-cadre* and as meta-critical. While the loaded subject summons un-broken linkages, the contextualized encounter opens up to a multitude of possible interpretations.

Each painting depicts a hooded figure, seemingly dancing or in a trance like state, the connection between them suggesting movement or stills from a narrative sequence, in which the viewer slowly and anxiously becomes aware of being surrounded by the action. The gallery press release reveals the exhibition title to be a reference to an audio track by the American rock band, 'The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion'. The title itself mediated the work by opening it up to interpretation. 'Mould' is a recurring reference point for Borremans' practice, in this instance alluded to, either as proliferation, as

in a fungal growth, or as a matrix. The latter is often cited in relation to the hollowed out archetypal figures of Borremans' paintings, referenced as porcelain figurines, the mannequin, or the costumed characters of the *commedia dell'arte*. According to the lyrics of the song, 'Black Mould' is perennial and a universally recurring problem. We can make of this what we will. Again the artist dares us to trust our eyes rather than our ears. If we also imagine the song to be the soundtrack for the paintings, we might suppose that the figures in this series of works seem to be caught in a trance-like state of dance; an altered state of consciousness, in which the body becomes the medium through which the spirit passes. Borremans understands the relationship between the body, animation and the still image. So, when a dancing figure is freeze-framed and decontextualized, something comical occurs. Flaying limbs arrested in time seem uncoordinated and out of control. Goya knew this too, when he painted *Blind Man's Buff*. This reference is amplified in the upstairs gallery, where the viewer was confronted with a series of works that conform to the circular arrangement of the figures in Goya's painting. Mapping the schematic of the work onto the real space of the gallery, replaces the blindfolded man with the viewer. The figures in all of the works are composed within the shallow space of the studio fashion shoot. The constructed nature of each painting revealed through the framing of the action against – what should be, but is not – a shadowless 'infinity-sweep'. The 'out of frame' real space of the photo-shoot is exposed. Any illusion of the horizonless backdrop is undone by the cast shadows, due to the seemingly inept use of studio lighting. Each image is constructed to suggest improvised action, caught between the unaligned position of the fixed camera, and a given set of props. We are either present at a dress rehearsal, or bearing witness to some post-production shenanigans. There is a suggestion that these pictures were not intended for general consumption. However, we should not overlook the fact that these are paintings of painting. The hooded figures become bodies and body parts objectified as paintings, in which the real and the representation are reversed. For Borremans like Roland Barthes, the fascination is with the painting-image and the convention of the encounter and its codes, not the subject represented, '[…] not from a language to a referent, but from one code to another […] Realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy […] through secondary mimesis (realism) copies what is already a copy' (Barthes 1974: 55).

The hooded figure is as close as Borremans has come to appropriating an iconic image. As representations that suggest acts of torture, they inevitably connect with the viral distribution of pictures of 'trophies of war' from Abu Ghraib. A spectacle that Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1975) had suggested had vanished from the public eye in the early nineteenth century. In the last grouping of works, on the top floor of the gallery, things have gotten somewhat out of hand. It is not just the iconography of Goya that appears. The word 'Black' in the title of the exhibition, now also points emphatically towards the diabolical acts depicted in Goya's late paintings. These hooded figures suggest there is some slippage of references between the Grand Inquisitor and the KKK. Religion and ritual has turned bad; flaming dismembered limbs are used as prosthetics for making images, and our thoughts inevitably turn to cannibalism. This transgression of moral boundaries

tests the viewer in the way we might anxiously anticipate watching horror in a film, while eating popcorn. Borremans' subversive tendencies quarry taste and his visual larder is rich in alimentary references. Sausages, butter and milk often feature in his early work as metaphors, while cheese is taken up as a pun, and for its synaesthetic potential (*Michele Morgan, La Mort et L'homme fromageux*, 1999). Another, if less savoury connection between the eye and the mouth, results in the production of the real via the reciprocity of the spectator and the image. The metaphoric deployment of cannibalism re-iterates Gombrich's suggestion that synaesthetic metaphors should perhaps be read as 'indicators of linkages not yet broken', rather than promoting the transfer of those established meanings (Peuker 2007: 166). The viewer in *Black Mould* is pre-figured as an intermedial subject, in which the contextualized encounter – painting as immanent materiality and images of horror – collapse into one another. It is not primarily the connoisseur's gaze that Borremans is summoning through his art historical allusions and somewhat fetishized references to the museum, but more likely the tourist's gaze within our culture of endless distraction. Here the provocation is aimed at the 'triadic posture' in which the artist challenges both the veracity of the image and the voracity of the eye. This aberrant turn unsettles fixed notions of authenticity and spectatorship and presents the beholder with the spectacle of a different pleasure.

Reality bleed

> I try to make an image that cannot be defined. That remains open like a wound.
>
> (Borremans 2010)

Ultimately Borremans' work may not be as remote from our time as it might at first appear. This position can be viewed as the realization that to be contemporary requires a certain dislocation to the present. Giorgio Agamben writes that in order to truly inhabit one's own contemporary moment requires the apprehension of a temporal fracture and the ability to perceive the obscurity of the present.

> Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. […] 'those who are truly contemporary, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to it's demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant (*inattuale*). But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism. They are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time […]
>
> (Agamben 2009: 40, original emphasis)

As to what might count as contemporary and what might conversely be deemed repetition or beyond the pale becomes an ever-diminishing perceptible condition, it is not enough to make claims for painting based upon the marked surface, purely on the grounds that it contains the latent potential of replayed time for the viewer; and is thus resistant to the accelerated economy of the digital image. As an avowed 'irrelevant' form, painting here picks up the critical slack of a minor language, literally in the form of a forbidden pleasure or irritation. Where the work gains some purchase in the present, is in relation to the visual rebus set up to deliberately suggest and withhold signification. This line of thinking is both attractive and dangerous. Attractive, because the effect that the painted surface has on the viewer stems from the very fact that it is something one sees and senses through the haptic and the optical, and not something that can be reduced to language. While the work ignites associations and maps onto the senses, it resists being fully grasped. Borremans himself has outlined this distancing strategy broadly as a way of maintaining a connection with the viewer on the level of the visual where verbal formulations are not applicable. Dangerous, because, in our search to locate signification, however much we might try to resist, we find ourselves caught within the familiar pattern of surface/depth, real/fake, inside/outside, scopic/vocative, etc. Any attempt at articulating a verbal response to the paintings results in a contradiction, in the apparition of the contrasting other. The dialectical slash ensures that the wound is kept forever open. Any reality bleed stems not in relation to how the work articulates the subject mimetically via the artist's skill, no matter how convincing it might be, but rather by coded and medial operations.

Though many of the subjects in Borremans paintings may have modernism's generalized normative conditioning in their sights, the work's purchase on the world comes from an exterior place. Within the axiom of Wollheim's 'enshrined posture', Borremans' paintings suggest that they present an instance of intimacy between painter, subject and imagined beholder. This reciprocity carries with it a socioethical dimension, at least for as long as the convention of exhibition display persists. Each player having something invested in the 'other's' position, inasmuch as each is willing or has the capacity to address the other seriously within the encounter.

While the influence of the expanding digitally mediated environment continues to erase boundaries and produces ever-weakening temporal and spatial bonds, another identifiable contemporary condition emerges in the fading distinction between the personal and the collective. Increasing interdependence between the interior and the exterior self exposes subjectivity to processes of atomization that blur the boundaries between the authenticity of the private sphere and the in-authenticity of the public domain. As a consequence our sense of self and our interiority seem to become progressively formed and mediated from the outside. The invisible forces behind our screens, driven by algorithms and binary computation exert their own form of social control. In addition to Wolheim's terms of 'seeing-in' and 'seeing-as' we might apply a seemingly apposite third term – 'seeing-through'. The indeterminacy of Borremans' paintings which oscillate between intimacy and obscurity, divert our

attention inevitably to the work's surface(s). The void at the centre which language can never fill becomes a space where we might increasingly sense our own contemporary anxiety as a prevailing state of extimacy.

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